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Walking in My Students' Shoes: An ESL Teacher Brings Theory to Life in Order to Transform Her Classroom

Mary Amanda Stewart

Throughout my career as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, it has been obvious that in each setting there is a popular phrase that accurately describes the classroom: “one of these things is not like the other” – and it’s the teacher! Yes! It is I who stands alone as the native English speaker in almost every class I have ever taught. I was a teacher assistant in an elementary school, an ESL and math teacher at the middle school level, and an adult education teacher at a community college for a total of 9 years. In each and every context I have been completely different from my students in regards to native language and culture. Of course, that is the case in many ESL contexts, but it began to strike me as odd when I started teaching undergraduate pre-service teachers at a university about how to teach English Language Learners (ELL students). I suddenly had 30 faces peering up at me, the ESL “guru,” waiting for me to enlighten them regarding theory, methodology, and best practices for teaching ELL students. I was the presumed expert on teaching a population of which I am not a member and who have experiences that I do not share. It occurred to me that in order to better my understanding of teaching ELL students, I had to recreate their experience in my own life as closely as possible. I decided to purposely engage in my own second language learning experience and take a walk in my students’ shoes.

Questioning

As I began dwelling on the issue described above, I developed a question that would guide my research: *How will my second language (L2) experience influence my beliefs about teaching ELL students?* I enrolled in a graduate-level Spanish course at the university in which I am a doctoral student in order that I might unearth an answer to my question. In this course, we were to read eight novels in Spanish by Mexican writers from the 20th century, respond to them through class discussion and essays, and complete our own research project concerning a theme from the course. Although I have a bachelor’s degree in Spanish and studied abroad in Mexico and in Spain for two summers, I had read only three novels in Spanish prior to this research. Furthermore, while I had much previous experience with the language and culture of interest, I had not engaged in those experiences with the purpose of living my ELL students’ experiences. This would indeed be a unique experience for me.

Conceptual Framework

During this study, I employed Pine’s (2009) view of action research as a paradigm which he describes as a “conceptual, social, philosophical, and cultural framework for doing research” (p. 30). He further explains that action research has the potential to

evaluate and change one's practice to improve instruction and student learning. Action research has long influenced theory and practice in the field of education, but it has only more recently impacted language teaching (Burns, 2005). Burns (2005) describes using action research to improve language instruction by minimizing the gap between research and practice and further developing the theories that influence teaching.

Data Collection

I took field notes on my experience after each of my 16 Spanish classes that met three hours a week for the duration of a semester. I did not, however, record my field notes during the actual class time because I was participating fully as a student. Each Monday night during the hour-long drive I had from the university to my house, I reflected and even verbalized my reaction to class that night, and then the following morning, I wrote my field notes. At three different points during the semester, after a period of initial field notes, I entered into what Pine (2009) refers to as a state of "reflexivity." I sought the deeper meaning from my experience by reviewing my field notes and writing further reflections about how that would/should affect my beliefs about teaching ELL students. Throughout this process of reflexivity, patterns emerged such as my feelings of anxiety and the frustration of expressing myself in the L2. From those patterns, I created categories that corresponded to research in second language acquisition and read deeply about the theories I was experiencing as a learner. Once the categories were identified, I sorted segments from my field notes and reflections into those categories. In the following section, I will discuss each category that emerged from the data, the literature supporting it, and how it affects my beliefs about teaching ELL students.

Theory Comes to Life

It was not until studying my data to look for patterns that I began to see how the many theories that I had studied - and even currently teach my undergraduate students -

came to life through my lived experience. I developed a new understanding of academic language, the components of making meaning in a second language, and appropriate scaffolding for struggling readers. Most importantly, by walking in my students' shoes, I developed empathy for them because I now more fully understand their situations.

BICS and CALP

One theory that most second language teachers are familiar with is the distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1979). This theory states that there is a difference in our conversational language that we use in everyday activities and our academic language which includes our vocabulary knowledge in specific content areas. For years, I have known of this distinction while teaching ELL students and have purposely taught the CALP required for success in content areas. I was not aware, however, of the frustration a second language learner could experience who is proficient in BICS but lacks exposure to a specific content area's CALP. This was my situation as I struggled to share my literary observations with the class one night. After we returned from break, we read a short story in Spanish silently to ourselves. As we began our discussion, the professor asked me what I thought about it. I wanted to say something very academic about the dismantling of binaries but quickly realized I had no idea how to say that in Spanish. So instead of my true literary observation, I commented on something far less academic. I felt very frustrated that I was unable to demonstrate my true understanding of the text because I lacked the vocabulary to discuss literature in Spanish. Now I will be certain to think of the CALP necessary to discuss literature in English in my ESL classes and teach that along with the novel we are reading. I will also be aware that what ELL students are able to express, is not necessarily representative of their true understanding of the text.

L1 Resources

I have always been a supporter of using L1 (first language) resources to aide my students' understanding of subjects such as math, science, and history; however, I have often shied away from having them use their first language when course objectives were to develop English language literacy skills. Despite my actual practice, I teach my undergraduate students that L1 resources can aide an ELL in making the L2 material more comprehensible, thus allowing language acquisition to occur (Krashen, 1981). It is now evident to me that this is one instance where my espoused theory did not meet my practice. In spite of my said belief, when it came to a purely ESL context, free from other content area objectives, I never provided nor encouraged any L1 resources. Cummins (2007) purports that using students' L1 will actually improve their ability to acquire meaning in the L2, the target language of instruction: "The empirical evidence is consistent both with an emphasis on extensive communicative interaction in the TL [Target Language]...and the utility of students' L1 as a cognitive tool in learning the TL" (pp. 226-227).

My personal L2 experience concurs with the research of Krashen and Cummins. Of the eight novels we read in my class, I was able to obtain two of the more difficult ones in English. I deemed them the most difficult because they were written in the early 1900s with many antiquated words and they contained several references to the Mexican Revolution, of which I had little prior knowledge. By reading them first in English and then in Spanish, the Spanish was much more comprehensible; therefore, greater language acquisition occurred. I was also able to find an English summary of some of the novels, which aided my understanding as I read them in Spanish. In the case of one novel, however, I had no L1 resources available. While reading it one afternoon, I suddenly realized that although I had read many pages, I had almost no idea of their content. I felt extremely frustrated and disheartened. Because of this experience, I

will encourage my ELL students to use an L1 resource if they are struggling while reading in English to the point that I was while reading in Spanish. I will make sure they know this is not a crutch, rather a strategy they can use to make the L2 reading more comprehensible, which will allow them to acquire the L2 more effectively (Krashen, 1985).

Importance of Culture in L2 Reading

Teaching the culture of the L2 is extremely important in making meaning of the language (Durocher, 2007) and coincides with the idea of choosing culturally relevant, high-interest texts for L2 readers in order for them to make the most meaning from the textual input (Krashen, 2004; Nuttall, 1982). The meaning of a particular text is tightly embedded in the culture in which it is written. An L2 reader may not understand 100% of the words or the ways in which they are used. Not understanding the cultures that authors and their characters inhabit creates another barrier to making meaning from the text. I noticed in my reading of Mexican novels that there were numerous aspects of the Mexican culture from the early to middle 1900s that inhibited my understanding of the text. These aspects included Latin American politics, the rituals and political position of the Catholic Church and the roles of men and women during the time surrounding the Mexican Revolution. Coming from a westernized, mainstream American background, I struggled to understand many of the events in the novels. From this experience, I more fully appreciate that language is only one of many factors at work in ELL students' ability to comprehend text. It is very important to choose literature that they will find interesting, give them adequate background knowledge of the topic, and help them understand the culture in which the language is embedded.

The Affective Filter

Of the categories that have emerged from my data, the one with the greatest amount of data support is the affective filter, which will

greatly affect my beliefs and actual practices for teaching ELL students for the remainder of my career. The affective filter hypothesis is attributed to Krashen (1981), but the idea was introduced a few years earlier under the title of “socio-affective filter” by Dulay and Burt (1977). It suggests that emotional variables can hinder comprehensible input from reaching the part of the brain responsible for acquiring language. These are among the emotional aspects of language acquisition that include anxiety, stress, motivation, and sense of belonging (Krashen, 2003). Krashen (2003) expands on this:

If the acquirer is anxious, has low self-esteem, does not consider himself or herself to be a potential member of the group that speaks the language [...], he or she may understand the input, but it will not reach the language acquisition device. A block, the affective filter, will keep it out. (p. 6)

Clearly, as teachers of ELL students, our overarching goal is for all of our input that we work so hard to make comprehensible to reach the place where our students can effectively acquire language. However, if the affective filter is up and the block occurs, all of our comprehensible input will be for naught.

The first aspect of the affective filter that appeared in my field notes was anxiety. Krashen (1981a) states that “low anxiety relates to success in second language acquisition” (p. 56). In my field notes about my first day of class, I described how nervous I was just to go there and introduce myself in Spanish because I was so scared of saying something incorrectly – which I did! My stress mounted as I left late for class due to reasons beyond my control, drove in the rain, got stopped by a train, and had difficulty finding the language building. Because I was so stressed on that first day when I arrived to class, I had great difficulty paying attention and comprehending the professor’s instructions about the syllabus and weekly assignments. As I reflected on those early

field notes, I became more acutely aware that ELL students are often very nervous about their first class in English. Everything is new to them – the language, the building, the classroom, the culture of the classroom, and even the location of the restrooms. It is very important to establish a welcoming classroom environment and thoroughly explain procedures and assignments to lower students’ anxiety levels.

A second aspect of the affective filter that I personally experienced was the concept of belonging. Belonging is juxtaposed with anxiety because as students feel that they belong to the learning community, their anxiety level will go down, thus lowering the affective filter and increasing language acquisition. Like many ELL students, I was in a new environment and did not know anyone when I arrived in class. Moreover, most of the other students already knew each other and spoke to one another exclusively in Spanish. I really struggled for the first three classes to become part of the classroom community, which contributed to my anxiety to speak in class and share my opinions about the novels. However, I eventually developed a friendship with some of the students and felt academically validated by the professor. By the middle of the semester, I really felt like I belonged and had something unique to offer the class that only I could. I took more risks, engaged in more conversation, and felt confirmed as a member of our learning community. One entry in my field notes, entitled *The Affective Effect of Belonging*, describes the tremendous difference that making friends had on my learning. As a teacher, it is my responsibility to establish a classroom environment that promotes camaraderie and makes every member feel welcome, wanted, and validated.

The final entry in my field notes, entitled *The Snowball Effect of Positive Feedback*, describes an interaction I had with the professor that exponentially increased my motivation, self-confidence, and actual abilities. I began the course feeling very unsure of myself in the academic Spanish

environment, but each time the professor wrote positive comments on my work, thanked me for my comments in class, or chose to share something I had written with the entire class, my self-confidence soared. I was a different student at the end of the semester, putting forth more effort, taking greater risks, and setting higher goals in my assignments. In my reflections, I noted that positive feedback can be empowering for students who lack confidence in the subject matter. By giving them such feedback, ELL students may be motivated to put forth more effort, which will produce a higher quality of work, greater self-confidence, greater learning and then even more deserved positive feedback in a continuous loop. I am certain that the instructor played a critical role in my success in the course due to this factor. I will intentionally follow his example in order to have a similar effect on my students.

The final component evidenced in the data that falls under the affective filter is the aspect of fun. Lin (2008) demonstrates the importance of fun in the classroom to lower the affective filter in her study with Taiwanese English as a Foreign Language students. She describes these activities that I label as fun as “joyful and motivation-stirring” and “relaxing pedagogies” (p. 126). Perhaps one of the most effective ways to lower the affective filter is to embrace the fun that I believe is inherent in second language learning. As I tried to negotiate the meaning of taboo occurrences in the novels I was reading, I made many mistakes which were met by friendly laughter from my professor and classmates. We joked and playfully teased each other in these situations which made our class time enjoyable. The professor established a very pleasurable and relaxing atmosphere that allowed for these occurrences, which very effectively lowered my affective filter. As a teacher, I must ask myself how often my students laugh in my class. I need to concentrate on making my L2 instruction fun, exciting, and relaxing for my students.

Prior to engaging in this action research, I would have said that I did a very good job

addressing the affective needs of my students; however, now I see that this is another area where my beliefs do not always correspond with my actions. I know most ELL students share my emotions when they first entered English-speaking classrooms. Washburn (2008) concurs with my realizations about the importance of the affective filter. He states that “avoiding confusion, frustration, and alienation are the first steps [to welcoming ELL students]. Teachers should focus on making ELL students feel they belong and ensuring that students understand most of what is going on” (p. 248). I now see many areas in my instruction that I can improve in this area as I teach ELL students.

Concluding Challenge

My initial research question was: *How will my L2 learning experience influence my beliefs about teaching ELL students?* The answer to this question exceeded my expectations. I realized that I did not have a very accurate view of my own teaching practices. As theory has come to life, I have noted where my stated beliefs did not match my practices – areas that I need to consider in my own instruction and specific steps I can take to address my students’ emotional needs. I know I am a better teacher from this experience and encourage all teachers to do the same, specifically teachers of ELL students. One of the problems that led me to my initial question was that I teach a population I am not a part of and that I do not have much experience walking in my students’ shoes. Many teachers of ELL students are in the same position I was. I suspect that if they engaged in an L2 learning experience their personal beliefs about teaching ELL students could be transformed. When teachers’ beliefs are transformed, so are their practices, their students’ learning, and their classrooms. Washburn (2008) echoes my proposition when he writes “I often wish all teachers were required to study a foreign language...because the study of a foreign language reduces us all...to the often frustrated and confused state that ELL students experience” (p. 250). If you teach English Language Learners, I dare you to take

the challenge of walking in their shoes. Your classroom will never be the same!

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